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Muxlim.com named 'most promising'

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An Arabic-language website targeting young people has been nominated as one of Europe's most promising internet start ups by the technology magazine Red Herring, a long-established observer of emerging internet trends.

Muxlim.com is seeking to replicate the success of websites such as YouTube, Facebook and MySpace by offering social networking, video sharing and personal publishing.



Iraqi youth surf the web at an internet cafe in Baghdad. Internet use in Iraq and other emerging Arab markets has doubled annually in recent years. **AFP**

The website has managed to enter a crowded market by focusing its attention on Arabic-speaking Muslims, who are currently underserved by web companies. It has moved even further into niche territory with a focus on moderated, family friendly content.

"Our objective was to create an online environment where Muslims and non-Muslims can enjoy social media in a safe and friendly atmosphere," said Mohamed el Fatatry, the Helsinki-based founder of the website.

"A huge number of internet users, in particular parents, want access to an online experience that does not expose people to vulgarity, offensive content and adult material."

Among the 200 companies recognised by the magazine as Europe's most exciting technology start ups, Muxlim.com was the only one targeting internet users in the Arab world.

Although the market catering to Arabic-speaking internet users is potentially very large, it remains relatively untapped compared with other major non-English groups online.

It is estimated that less than half of one per cent of all the information on the internet is in Arabic.

Nevertheless, the market is expanding rapidly.

"Our audience is growing at an incredible rate," said Daraid Assas, the sales manager for the Arabic web portal Jeeran.com.

"We have 4.2 million viewers per month and more than 1.5 million members. Our membership is growing by five per cent each month."

At this rate, Jeeran.com is likely to exceed three million members by mid-2009.

Ahmed Nassef, the vice-president of the Maktoob Group, the Arab world's largest internet company, says the audience for Arabic-language content online is growing much faster than the market for advertising.

"Growth in ad spend is nowhere near keeping up with the audience," said Mr Nassef. "Two years ago, our site was getting two million unique views, today we get 10 million. But advertisers are still taking it very slowly and the industry still spends less than one per cent of its total online."

Online advertising targeting Arab viewers is almost certain to rise significantly as it catches up with international trends.

In Western Europe and North America, online accounts for more than 10 per cent of total ad spending, a share that is expected to double by 2012.

Mr Assas said that with the online advertising market changing so dramatically, it was difficult to estimate how much revenue a site like his should earn in a year.

He believed that bringing in US\$1 million (Dh3.6m) would be "a piece of cake", and that the company might eventually double that figure.

Internet use in the Arab world is growing by more than 25 per cent a year, according to the International Telecommunications Union. In emerging markets such as Egypt, Iraq and Algeria, the number of internet users has doubled annually in recent years.

Koora.com, a sports website that is the second-most viewed Arabic-language portal, almost doubled its readership last year. It relies entirely on the amateur reporting of its members, who cover everything from Danish car races to South Korean handball tournaments.

A spokesman for Koora would not discuss the size or growth of the website's audience or advertising sales, but said the company was "making a healthy profit and investing in the resources needed to support the major, ongoing increases in page views that we are experiencing".

The most successful website in the Arab world is Maktoob.com, a Jordanian web portal that is now among the 150 most popular destinations on the internet, according to Alexa, an internet traffic monitoring service.

Founded in 2000 with venture capital from the Cairo-based investment bank EFG-Hermes, Maktoob was the first web mail service to be offered in both English and Arabic and the first to offer a blogging platform for Arab-speaking users.

In 2007, it launched the first Arabic social networking service, signing up 200,000 new users in the first two months.

Mr Nassef would not discuss numbers regarding advertising revenue at Maktoob.com, but he did say that advertising revenues had doubled year-on-year since 2004.

"The future is extremely bright for businesses in our market space," he said. "Advertisers will play catch up with the rest of the world, audiences will boom and we will be right in the middle of it."

